

**Sermon: “The Blessings of Losing & Keeping Your Life:  
Transforming Dirt into Soil”**

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Happy first full day of long-awaited Spring!!

Yesterday at 5:37 AM we finally came to Spring Equinox 2021 in Northern Hemisphere, the day when we come closest to having an equal amount of daylight and darkness – and now the days continue to get longer and the nights shorter until we reach the Summer Solstice on June 21. Just 10 days ago we marked one year since the World Health Organization declared the Covid-19 coronavirus a pandemic. And as of two days ago, March 19, 2021, 2.69M people world-wide have died from the Covid-19 coronavirus; 543,300, or about 20%, died in the U.S. alone.

It's as if we've been in hibernation for at least a year, and even now there's just barely a glimpse of green in our lawns, the buds on the trees not quite bursting into flower and leaf.

We're like dried out bulbs – just beginning to see a hint of green.

Still, as of Mar. 15, 2021 -- The United States has put more than 100 million doses of coronavirus vaccine into the arms of Americans since the first vaccination on Dec. 14. The Associated Press reports that currently, the country administers around 2.5 million doses each day. At this rate, there will be enough vaccine for every adult American to be vaccinated by July 4.

So maybe, just maybe, we'll be able to soon emerge from our winter-Covid pandemic dens and live in ways that are a little less isolated, connect in ways that are a little less "virtual," and return to lives that are a little more up close and personal. Not lives back to normal necessarily – for too many of us who've lost loved ones over this last year, that will not be possible. But a little more normal.

So spring is here – and yet there is the feeling – and the reality -- of "here.... but not yet."

Still, we can at least begin to hear the sounds of spring... Last week on one of those really warm days, Sam and I heard our first peepers singing "it's Spring, It's Spring!" down by the wetlands creek that runs through the farmland behind our mailbox on Cape Horn Road. Yesterday I heard a neighbor's gardener blowing away leaves and getting the landscape ready for the new growth soon to come. No doubt the nearby farmers are already starting to till up the earth, getting the soil ready for planting.

The feeling of expectation that comes with Spring is very similar to, and timely with, the sense of expectation with Easter. What was seemingly dead, is now very much alive – the newness of life springing from the cold darkness of death. And this year – perhaps even more sweet – we have the happy prospect that we shall be back in worship in-person. We missed that as part of our celebrating Easter last year.

Today's Gospel reading, a reading from the Gospel of John, places Jesus in Jerusalem, maybe a day after the crowds of people waved palms as he entered the Holy City. We heard Jesus talking about his impending death, and how he will die, and uses the example of a grain of wheat to explain what is to happen. You have probably heard this particular passage many times over your lifetime "Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried (*or maybe it could be better translated as planted?*), it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life ***just as it is destroys that life***. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal." (John 12: 24-25).

Jesus is telling his disciples that he must die in order for the world he will be leaving to experience real and eternal life. But he's not just telling his disciples that he will die to this world and thereby lifted up to heaven and eternal life. He is telling his disciples that anyone who doesn't die to what was -- say, just as an acorn must no longer be an acorn to become a tree, or a caterpillar must create a cocoon in which it will die in order to become a butterfly, if we try to hold onto what was, we will die to what could be. By holding onto life, we lose the promise of eternal life.

We are like the bulb that becomes an Easter Lily each year -- we must die in order to once again grow green in the Spring.

**Without darkness, there is no spring.**

**Without worms, no flowers.**

**All fallen leaves were once new sprouts.**

**And will be again.**

--Spiritual Directors International 2021 Conference Brochure

But what of that soil that the wheat needs to be planted in, in order to sprouts and reproduces itself many times over? How is that soil prepared for the grain of wheat to be planted? What happens if that grain of wheat is cast onto a dirt roadway or onto a sandy beach? Will the grain of wheat grow wherever it is without the soil being properly prepared and the crop watered and cultivated?

I've been doing a bit of research on what makes good growing soil. I googled dirt and soil, and this is what I found out from organic gardener Nan Fisher, writing about how to turn dirt into soil:

Dirt is basically dead. There are no living organisms in it to support life. Soil, or topsoil, on the other hand, has substance. It has organic matter, or humus, which comprises topsoil. Good topsoil is a living and self-sustaining ecosystem made up of plant matter, earthworms, microorganisms, fungi, bacteria, and insects.

So, what if all you've got right now is a yard of dirt? To transform dirt into good garden soil, you just need to add the things that distinguish the two – the organic matter – the humus – add in the (once live) materials that have broken down and decayed (or died) over time to create a vibrant ecosystem of organisms to feed your garden – to feed your soil.

Compost is the best path to healthy garden soil. It is simply raw materials that have broken down and decayed over time to create a vibrant ecosystem of organisms to feed your garden. Carbon and nitrogen, in a ratio of 2:1, make a suitable habitat for earthworms, insects and fungi, the elements responsible for decomposition.

Dead leaves, garden debris, small twigs, straw, paper and cardboard provide carbon. Fresh plant material, such as kitchen scraps and grass clippings, provide nitrogen.

Water your pile and turn with a pitchfork regularly. Water and aeration speed up the process.

So why am I giving you all this detail about what makes good gardening soil, a group of people that most likely know a heck of a lot more about gardening than I do?

Well, I'm talking here about what makes good soil to plant in because I think that if we take this understanding of how we prepare the soil so that it will nourish what we are planting, and connect that to the metaphor of the grain of wheat and the natural process of plants and living matter having to die in order to live – we gain additional insight into the beatitude “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God” or as translated by Rev. Dr. Eugene Peterson for The Message, “You're blessed when you get your inside world – your mind and heart – put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.”

In other words, how do we prepare our internal “soil” -- our hearts and minds -- for the planting in our hearts – in our inner selves -- of the transformational message of Easter, a message that we so dearly want to hear, especially now as we emerge from our year of Covid hibernation? How do we prepare our hearts for reawakening, letting die what’s no longer or never has been life-giving, and using what has died as fertilizer and compost for what is green and growing?

Once again, I was googling what some others have written about the subject, and came across:

### **3 Ways to Spiritually Clean Your Heart by Jenny Shinsky, a Christian podcaster.**

1. Confess your sins to God. Our sins weigh us down and hold us hostage. But the healing power of confession restores our relationship with God and sets us free. ...
2. Read **scripture**. Immerse yourself in God's word every day. His words are alive and will clean the depths of your **heart** and renew your spirit. ...
3. Forgiveness. (I want to add: Forgive others. Forgive yourself. Ask God for Forgiveness)

Maybe the only other direction I would add is to water your heart soil regularly and to turn over the compost of your heart with prayer –to hold God in your heart and, to partially steal a phrase often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, “pray always and if necessary use words.”

Would you please join me now as I offer up this prayer?

Creator Spirit God: we ask that you help us prepare our hearts for Easter and the message of transformation and eternal life that we receive in our acceptance of Jesus Christ as our savior and conveyer of your divine grace in our lives.

We pray for your forgiveness of us when we have not acted or interceded to uphold your commandments, most importantly your greatest commandment to love you with all our hearts, minds and spirits, and our neighbors as ourselves. We realize that it is those two greatest commandments that are the most essential components of how we prepare our inner world -- our hearts and minds -- for the planting of seeds of love and then, through the fruit of those seeds, see you in the outside world. We ask for your intercession that we may find the way to forgive not just others but also ourselves for when we come up short in being Christian in this difficult challenging world.

Creator Spirit: we love your message of Easter and transformation. May you be full within our hearts as we transform now from bulb to flower, from caterpillar to butterfly and marvel at the exploding of Spring all around us.

We pray for wisdom, reconciliation, forgiveness and love of you, ourselves, our neighbors and yes, even our enemies, next door and on the other side of the world. We ask for this as we prepare our hearts for your miracle of eternal life. Amen. and Amen.